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SUBJECT: PILORAMA ROCKS THE GHOSTS OF THE GULAG

REF: YEKATERINBURG 42

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¶1. (U) Summary: Frequent showers during the weekend of July 25-27 did not dampen the spirits of an estimated crowd of 6,000 to 9,000 people who attended the 5th annual Pilorama Civic Forum held on the site of the Perm-36 Memorial Museum, located 90 kilometers from Perm. From Friday evening through Sunday, the former GULag camp, which held political prisoners until 1988, was the site of discussions that delved into the history of political repression, the future of civil society in Russia, and the role of human rights in the world today. A wide variety of theatrical and musical performances made the event culturally relevant for the majority of young attendees. International participants came from UNHCR's Moscow office, Poland, Germany, Hungary, Finland, and the U.S. CG participated in the opening ceremony and contributed a performance of American music on the main stage. End summary.

History, Human Rights, and Rock and Roll

¶2. (SBU) The wonder of Pilorama - named for the former saw mill where inmates worked in the "industrial zone" of the camp - derives from the incongruity of hosting a celebration of human rights on territory that had been built to punish those who deviated from Soviet political conformity. Perhaps even more remarkable is that every year, the festival draws former "zeks" to participate, including former Soviet dissident Sergey Kovalev, who did time in Perm-36. Yuliy Kim, one of the great bards of the dissident era and Adam Michnik, a leader in the Polish student/worker protest movement of the late sixties and seventies and later a key "Solidarity" figure, were also present to lend first hand credibility to the discussions. Stars such as Russian rock legend Yuriy Shevchuk and singer-songwriter-journalist Natella Boltyanska, who hosts a program on Ekho Moskvyy, brought the house down with their bravura performances on the outdoor stage.

Pilorama Comes of Age

¶3. (SBU) Modest in its origins in 2005 as a gathering of activists and veterans of the human rights movement, Pilorama can no longer be described as a small underground "happening." With Russian Federation Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin lending his prestige and Perm Kray governor Oleg Chirkunov dropping by on Saturday afternoon, the festival is on the verge of becoming a bona fide event of major cultural and political significance. That said, there was no federal news coverage of the festival and local coverage was low-key and not particularly positive. Flamboyant Perm Kray Minister of Culture Boris Milgram and the region's dedicated human rights Ombudswoman Tatyana Margolina both took time from their busy organizational duties for lengthy one-on-one conversations with the CG.

Russia's Woodstock in Miniature

¶4. (SBU) The crowd far exceeded estimates of expected

attendance. Rain turned an extensive tent city with a couple of thousand mostly young campers into a muddy, beer-fueled but generally well-behaved mass party that resembled a mini Russian Woodstock. Festival goers gave no clear answer to the question of whether Russian youth knows or cares about the history of the Gulag. A great many people just came for the music and the camping. But young people participated in the discussions, showed avid interest in the exhibits and gave the impression that some segments of Russian youth are aware of this history and are interested in exploring the meaning of democracy and asserting their rights. Anna Pastukhova, leader of Yekaterinburg's Memorial affiliate, commented that the beauty of Pilorama is its cumulative educational effect. Even those who came just for the party atmosphere were bound to have absorbed something of the political and social context of the event.

Only in Perm?

15. (SBU) Much has been written about the atmosphere of tolerance that differentiates Perm Kray from its neighbors (see reftel). Minister Milgram's ambitious and controversial "cultural revolution" is in the process of transforming the city into a contemporary bearer of its rich cultural legacy. Meanwhile, Ms. Margolina claimed success in implementing programs that protect the disadvantaged by influence and cooperation instead of confrontation, solidifying Perm's reputation as a region where people know how to compromise, a skill that is often lacking elsewhere in the Russian political scene. Pilorama is emblematic of this atmosphere and stands as a rare example of Russians openly attempting to come to grips with this tragic aspect of their history.

International participation

16. (SBU) International displays included an exhibit on Auschwitz-Birkenau and a retrospective of the films of Andrej Wajda. The Moscow-based UNHCR representative participated in the discussions and an aging Hungarian rocker got the crowd moving. Accompanying himself on guitar, CG performed a warmly-received 20 minute program of American music that included a rendition of Dylan's "I Shall Be Released," complete with audience participation. As the German CG said as she opened a photo exhibit commemorating the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, "Twenty years ago, who would have expected that an American diplomat would be singing "Route 66" on a stage in a former Gulag camp?" Post plans to follow up on the suggestion of Perm-36 deputy director Tatyana Kurzina to invite a U.S. human rights expert or an American musical group to participate in next year's event.

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